

Black public servants laud their forerunners

By **KURT BRESSWEIN**

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EASTON — It's a tale of two black men serving the city that treated them well because of the men who had gone before them.

Scheldon Smith became the city's second black police captain last month, while Ken Brown stepped in as the third black elected official.

Police Chief Stephen Mazzeo promoted Smith; Brown joined city council following his election last November.

Both events made them only the fourth and fifth blacks to arrive in positions of authority since Easton's

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18th century founding.

Though today they would have undoubtedly attained their positions based on merit alone, they have three men in particular to thank for breaking Easton's racial barrier.

In the police department, Andrew Theadford became the first black officer in 1953. Stephen Henley followed as the city's first black police captain in 1980, after 22 years on the force.

In city politics, Bill Houston won his first run for city council in 1982.

"I wasn't the first black person to run for council," Houston said Friday. "I had role models, people I looked up to when I was a young man in Easton, who attempted to break that barrier, and I guess it was a little too soon for them."

Houston names Pat Cooper and Frances Ketchen as those role models. In turn, Brown, who served on the Easton Area school board from 1997 to 2001 and again from 2002 to 2003, drew inspiration from Houston and Alfredean Jones, Easton's other black councilman.

Both Cooper and Ketchen lost their runs for office, as did Houston last year in his bid to be the Democratic candidate for mayor.

Houston doesn't blame prejudice. In fact, Houston, Brown and Smith said they never experienced racism in Easton.

Theadford and Henley, on the other hand, tell different stories. Neither speaks of widespread prejudice in Easton. It was more isolated, like in the bars of the 1970s where Henley played drums with jazz bands.

"The guy that played saxophone, he says, 'Steve, it's getting close to intermission. If you want a drink, I have to get it for you,'" Henley, now 80, recalled about playing out one night. "They won't serve you at the bar."

The most racism Henley and the 77-year-old Theadford recall happened outside Easton, during their Army days. Theadford's Army Reserve unit headed to St. Louis for training during the late 1950s.

They arrived after dark. A policeman stopped them and warned the blacks to stay off the streets at night.

Henley rose to the rank of staff sergeant in the Army. Before he was shipped off to World War II, where he fought from New Guinea to Iwo Jima in an amphibious assault unit and earned several bronze stars, he requested to go to the Army's Officer Candidate School in Georgia.

"And my answer was, 'Well sergeant, we have no openings for black lieutenants right now,'" he recalled. "That's what they told me. I held that for a long time."

On the police force since 1958, Henley said he "could smell" jealousy among the white officers whom he beat for the promotion to captain.

"But I didn't let that bother me," he said last week in his Philadelphia Road home, hemmed in by five big blue spruce trees. "I never had a race problem with the police department, never really got in an argument or anything. I could communicate pretty good with people."

When Henley breaks out his scrapbook of yellowed news clippings about his police years, he focuses on the good memories. There was the commendation from former Mayor Fred Ashton, then on

city council, for helping to rescue Ruth Gebhardt from a fourth-floor ledge at 609 Northampton St., on Oct. 18, 1964.

Henley is particularly proud of his February 1968 certificate from the U.S. Department of Commerce, attesting to his completion of the FBI Narcotics Training School.

Henley retired in 1984 after 26 years.

Theadford has similarly fond memories of his 20 years in the department, up to his retirement in 1973.

"As far as dealing with most of the officers, they treated me real good," Theadford said in his Line Street home with his wife, Ida, nearby. "I would have to say that everybody I worked with was great."

Theadford grew up near Pittsburgh and returned to Easton from his Army deployment to Germany in 1952 because his parents had moved here.

He recalls several Easton nightclubs and bars from the 1950s that catered to black clientele.

"See, I never drank," Theadford said. "They never had to serve nobody as far as I'm concerned."

Racial tensions in the city peaked for him during the race riots of the 1960s. Members of the police department's K-9 unit had unleashed a dog on a black teenager holding his mother's broomstick. Theadford pulled off the dog and put the boy in his patrol car.

"Actually, I made the arrest, and I wound up getting three days off for interfering," Theadford said. "They were just hassling with him, giving him a hard time. That's the only thing I had that I would say was a prejudice against me."

Police work was among several jobs both Henley and Theadford held. Henley, who escaped World War II unscathed, got his foot badly burned by molten metal at the Lehigh Foundry shortly after returning home.

Before Theadford joined the force, he worked as a trash collector, fixed automobile springs and processed animal fur. After his retirement, he worked construction, owned a scrap yard and worked eight years as a Northampton County Court officer.

For Sheldon Smith, being a police officer was all he ever wanted to do. Originally from Plainfield, N.J., he moved with his mother to northern Palmer Township in eighth grade and graduated from Nazareth Area High School in 1977.

He joined the Army and became an intelligence specialist before leaving the service in early 1992. Throughout his career, race was never an issue.

"The way I was raised and the way I brought myself up was to do the best I can," said Smith, who turned his determination into a bodybuilding hobby while in the Army. "I always based my accomplishments on my abilities and hopefully everybody else has, too."

"If it were a factor, nobody ever brought it to my attention."

Mazzeo said he and Mayor Phil Mitman have made it a priority to hire more minorities. Along with Smith, who is captain of field services like Henley was, Sam Smith is the only other black officer in the police department.

"I really feel if you look at the population of the city, a more diverse workforce would assist us there, and it's the right thing to do," Mazzeo said.



Theadford



Henley